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Testimony: The Life of Street Children in Brazil and Initiatives to Help Them

Dear respected committee members:

Good afternoon. My name is Teresa Santos. Since 2002, I have been the facilitator of a network of Christian organizations that work with children at risk in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This network, Rede Viva-RJ, is affiliated with an international organization called Viva Network. For seven years prior to 2002, I worked among the street children and was able to open three homes for children at different stages of recovery. In this work, I have seen many lives transformed. For about ten years Jubilee Campaign has been our contact and a partner in the work we started among street children in Rio de Janeiro.

I have a son by heart, João Ricardo, one of the boys we took off the streets about nine years ago. He was a challenge for me and for the whole team that used to work in the homes. But in another way he is a great motivation for me to press on fighting for the rights and lives of the thousands and millions children who are of the streets and on the street. There is a solution; there is a way out. It is possible for them to change.

João Ricardo was twelve years old when our street team approached him in a group of other street kids in one of the districts of the city of Rio de Janeiro. He had not been on the streets long, but he was there enough to be considered a street child, one who makes the street his home, his playground, his living, his life; one who can find in the street group the understanding that many times he cannot find in the family or society; one who can find in the other street kids best friends and a family. Unfortunately, a street child can also find dissolution, hunger, a lack of protection, violence, abuse, fear, hopelessness, rejection, enemies and death, which can come as a result of the excessive use of drugs, sicknesses such as HIV/AIDS or drug gangs. Death also comes for street kids when they are murdered by those who believe it is better to eliminate a street child today than to face a criminal tomorrow.

This brings to mind the horrifying murder of eight street kids by police officers one night in July 1993 as they were sleeping in front of a church in the center of the city of Rio. Driving today in the place makes me think that although there have been many proposals and programs for addressing the problems of Brazilian street kids, not much has been achieved. There are still a large number of kids on the streets, and murder takes place with impunity. I am glad João did not hang around that area and was able to face a different future.

João was the oldest of four, though his sister and two younger brothers had a different father who was already dead. The family lived in a small home in a big slum area on the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. His mother struggled to survive and to raise the kids. At the age of eight, João, being the oldest, used to accompany his mother as she worked on the streets selling things for the provision of her family. He had to work to help her, and began spending most of his time on the

streets. A similar situation is faced today by millions of children all over Brazil, who work and live on the streets.

João's family was part of the 35% of the population in which families live on incomes of \$60 or less per month. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) affirms that poverty in Brazil is concentrated in the children, with more than 27.4 million poor children. Consequently, thousands of children have to work to survive, losing their childhood, losing interest in education and becoming street children like João. Little by little he learned about life on the streets, was deceived by a false sense of freedom and one day, being afraid of his mother's violence, decided to run away and make the street his new home.

A recent study conducted by the city of Rio de Janeiro said there are 700 children on the streets—perhaps as many as one thousand—and approximately 100,000 children aged 7 to 18 living on the streets of all the main cities of Brazil. But some NGOs suggest that there are many more than two thousand in Rio. The point is that the profile of the street child has changed. From his experience throughout almost twenty years working with street children, Robert Schmidt has seen changes in the characteristics of the street children. As the leader of Refuge for Street Children Association (REMER), an organization with its headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, Schmidt says there has been growth in the number of kids who leave home and, instead of living on the streets, invade empty and abandoned buildings around the city or in the slum areas, living in groups without any infrastructure and without the means to provide for their basic needs.

Because of the difficulties of street life, children build protective barriers inside themselves. One of the greatest challenges for anyone trying to reach out to those kids is the challenge of taking not only the child out of the street but the street out of the child. After a time of friendship building and trust gain, João came to the transitory home with five of his street friends. But the whole group came with no limits, with no sense of respect, with a false concept of freedom, with their hearts full of anger, hate and fear, and with the street inside themselves. João was what some people would call a "hard case," a "lost cause." Three times he led the other boys in rebelling and motivated them to go back to the streets. But they would always return. The third time was a turning point in João's life. Somehow I could see that he was telling the truth when he asked for another chance, that he needed help and would really change. I knew it would not be easy for him, but he had to be given a chance and my team workers and I would have to be prepared to help him overcome those difficulties and be an example of social inclusion, not exclusion.

Sometimes society has difficulty seeing that a street child is just like any other child: a human being in his stage of development, an individual just like any other citizen, with feelings, dreams and needs, and that the streets cannot provide the means to face reality. Instead, they are seen as delinquents—criminals that need to be punished. This attitude simply legitimates a process of exclusion.

João's transformation was a process that required a holistic, multi-stage program, involving a lot of understanding, love and care. The holistic approach is very important, for it is not only the physical and emotional aspects that need to be restored and fulfilled. For the transformation of João's life, the spiritual relationship had also to be restored. Religious teaching was very important, for it was at this point that he and many other children had the chance to understand what it means to love and to be loved, what it means to forgive and to be forgiven. It gave him new hope to continue in life, to be motivated to return to school and to

become a different person—a citizen respected by society in spite of his past. I had the privilege to be one of the educators who helped João in this process. I remember when, after we had found his family—his mother, brothers, sister and some relatives—when his mother met him after a long time and could hear him give her advice about life, she was shocked and asked me what we had done with him, for he was a completely new kid. He used to be violent and disrespectful of authority and had no interest in studying or in religious things whatsoever—a boy full of anger and hate. His mother's words made me reflect on the need for a holistic way of working, for his new concept of God—the concept that he was loved and forgiven—was the starting point for his life changing.

After a process of working with his family that involved helping his mother rebuild their home, making possible João's return to some minimum conditions of living, and restoring family relations, João was ready to return home. But one day, the sad news came that his mother had been killed by HIV/AIDS. She left a letter asking that the two other boys be taken to the institution and the little girl be given to some neighbor. What to do at this point? Would the institutionalization of these two little boys be the solution for their lives? After some research and much talking, it was agreed that they would be cared for by an aunt who was the closest relative, but the institution had to commit itself with some financial and food help, for she had five other kids to look after and was not able to work. She was willing to receive João as well, but her house did not have space for everyone. Several actions were taken to help the family structure receive João.

When João was finally able to be reintegrated to his relative's family, he was back in school, taking English and computer classes, and had been prepared to face life back in the slum. In order to make João's reintegration possible, the institution had to help his relatives to start a project of building a new home, for the other one was too small and half of it had come down after a strong rainstorm. After a few years, one of his brothers died of AIDS at the age of nine. Once more, João had to face another great loss in his life, but the interesting thing is the resilience he had created to overcome the difficulties of life and to press on to seek a better and more respectable future. There he was, an orphan living with his brothers' relatives, without a reference in life, but with a great desire to be a successful person. I saw that to help João to persevere in his heart desire and not to return to the streets or, even worse, to get involved in the drug gangs, he needed a strong reference. By the time he returned to his family, I was no longer working in the institution, but I have developed a very good relationship with him and often contact him to check on him and motivate him to press on. I became his mentor, his reference—almost like his mother—someone he would always look for when he needed advice or needed to share his heart, his desires and his problems. Sometimes it was hard even for me to believe he was the same tough boy who had come to the children's home, who would not listen to or obey anyone. João is 21 years old today and he still finds in me his point of reference, which I perceive as a great responsibility.

One of João's biggest desires was to serve in the army, but because he was a boy from the slums he was not accepted. He was very frustrated and desolate, but he did not despair or lose hope. Inside himself there is a young human being with dreams and a strong desire to be a winner. Unable to find a job, to find a way to help supply the needs of his brothers and sister or to help his aunt raise them, he felt tempted to accept the easy and short way to life. He told me that several times he has received invitations to work for the drug business, which pays a child in a week more than a hard worker can make in a whole month. But he always overcomes those difficult times and says no to the offers, for inside him there are still good principles he learned during his time in the institution. He has the fear of God and a strong desire and assurance that he will make his way by honest means, in spite of all rejection and exclusion by a prejudiced society that cannot see a black boy who use to be a street child and who lives in the slums as anything but a threat.

Once, not long ago, I was very concerned for João and his whole family. His aunt had separated and had to take care of his second brother, who was becoming very sick and would spend hours and days being attended by our failed hospital system. She still had to provide for her other five children, only one of whom was working. There were times that they did not have anything to eat or had only one meal a day. The family was registered in a local government program that gave a check to help to supply the family's needs, but it was not enough. Several other people had to get mobilized to help them. João could not find a job, almost became depressed because he felt rejected and useless, having to face his second brother's illness, his aunt in despair and the whole family expecting him to get a job and help to support them. I had to intervene and find something for him to do, for by that time he was about to come to the conclusion that there was no other way aside from working for the drug business, which was still inviting and encouraging him to join the group. It was a hard time. The government program helped some, but did not solve either the physical or the emotional problems the whole family faced. Finally, through the network that has as its one object the exchange of information, we were able to get his aunt a job. Not long after, we also found João a job, and his cousin found a job as well. João did not make much money, but he told me that was not the most important thing. The point was that he felt dignity and that he was a respectable citizen because he could say he had a job. Assistance programs will help in a survival situation, but will never replace the need for concrete actions to help people have their rights as human beings and citizens. I was very happy to hear the other day that the family gave back the assistance that they were receiving from the government, for now they were happy and proud to be able to provide for their own needs.

According to ONU, Brazil has the tenth-largest economy in the world, but also ranks eighth in the world in social inequality; this has aggravated chronic social ills. As a sad illustration of further social decay, the Brazilian Center for Childhood and Adolescence (CBIA) recently estimated that about 500,000 girls have turned to prostitution to earn a living. Some of these girls are as young as nine years old. According to the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper, the Government of the State of Pará estimated that there were 30,000 child prostitutes between the ages of 11 and 15 in that state alone. Since the 1960s, Brazil has seen a massive exodus from the rural areas to the big urban centers. A large number of these migrants come to the cities looking for a better life, a job and a place to live. Many of them end up not finding jobs and have to face the reality of life in the crowded slums when not on the streets. As the number of slum dwellers grows, so do the numbers of street children. With the growth of the tourism industry, poor girls have found that selling their bodies has become a way for them to have access to the dollars of tourists. In the Northeast, moreover, thousands of children who resist malnourishment have to live with some mental disorders.

In 1990, as the result of intensive work by a number of Brazilians on behalf of the rights of children, the Statute of Children and Adolescents—the "ECA" (Law 8069/90)—was enacted. It regularized the 1988 revision of the Brazilian Constitution, which in Article 227 states: "It is the duty of the family, society and the state to assure with absolute priority the rights of children and adolescents to life, health, food, education, leisure, occupational training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life, and in addition to protect them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression."

Up to this point children had been considered the object of state intervention, but from now on children and adolescents have the right to be seen and considered the subject of elementary needs of human beings, with the right to receive universal assistance. They are seen as citizens with the right to be respected and protected. The ECA also brought about the decentralization of public policies so that now the most important actor is the locality. The responsibility established in the

new legislation to organize, create and put in practice local public policies that will guarantee the rights of children is now the responsibility of the nearly 5,000 municipalities around the country. With the creation mandated by ECA, each municipality has the challenge to form Children's Rights Councils (*Conselhos de Direitos*) and Guardianship Councils (*Conselhos Tutelares*), whose members are from both the government and nongovernmental organizations.

The creation of effective councils throughout Brazil has become one of the foremost priorities for organizations concerned with the rights of children. The implementation of the Child Statute is thus not only a reform of child welfare laws, but also a significant test of—and precedent in—the democratization of Brazilian society.

There is no doubt that the ECA is an efficient legislation. It has served as a model for more than ten different countries, but 15 years after the law was put in place, most of it is still merely words on paper; it needs to be put into practice. UNICEF says that the Brazilian statute is one of the most advanced in the world. But it will become reality only when remaining disparities are overcome and each of the 61 million boys and girls in the country has an equal opportunity.

Drawing attention to the fact that the ECA says children and adolescents are the absolute priority of the family, society and state, I would like to present some important points that I believe we all need to reflect on as we seek solutions better to protect and help the millions of street children in Brazil:

1. The rights of street children need to be applied by the family, the society and the state as an “absolute priority,” as stated in the Constitution.

A priority for the state

All the rights a street child needs are written in the Children's Statute, but the problem is that we need to see more interest from the parties involved to make the statute effective. From the state side, there needs to be a real interest in making this an important issue; they need to raise the subject as much as they can, formulating and putting in practice public social policies that will help the street child.

Children should be a priority in the government's budget. The lack of money creates a problem for the quality and sustainability of the few shelters that exist, and a problem for the reintegration of the kids back into their families.

The state should seek for means to guarantee that all 5,000 cities will have a Children's Rights Council and a Guardian Council. Thousands of children are suffering maltreatment, are on the streets and are unprotected because there is no interest on the part of local governors to establish the Children's Councils. A friend of mine who started a ministry in a city called São José de Caiana, in the interior of the State of Paraíba, was shocked at the way children had been abused and maltreated when she arrived there seven years ago. One day she decided to denounce the maltreatment of a little girl who was about to die. She had to go miles away looking for one Guardian Council who could help in the case. The help the Council gave was not effective for several reasons, the distance being one of them. But the most amazing and shocking point was the reaction of the local population, who strongly discriminated against her and hired someone to kill her, which, by a miracle, did not happen. Unfortunately, by that time she had decided she would never do it again. Very recently she decided to adopt a child who was also suffering from

malnutrition and maltreatment. And last week she asked me for help to establish a Children's Council in her city.

A priority for society

Society is very badly informed about the rights of children. In the case mentioned above, almost the whole town was against the idea that a local family would be denounced because a child had been maltreated, something they consider "normal." There are so many situations like this and nothing much is done about them, because maltreatment of children has become acceptable in the society. If there is no interest from the governmental side about the creation of a Children's Council, the organized society could push for it; the problem is that in many towns and cities the society is neither organized nor educated, as in the case above. There is a need for a strong campaign to make the children's law understandable, acceptable and applicable by the whole society. I believe it would help to decrease the number of cases of children who run away from home because of maltreatment and domestic violence, which is the case for many street children.

But we do not need to go to places where the population is less educated to see the lack of understanding of the children's law. In the mega-cities such as Rio or São Paulo, where the population lives under the constant fear of violence, people do not understand that the way to reduce violence is not by reducing the penal age or desiring the return of the use of violence and brutal penalties against young lives. People need to understand that the new law does not aim to protect criminals or give them immunity, but aims to guarantee basic rights that will reduce violence in the society

I remember a boy in the streets telling me that it did not matter to him if he did bad things--if he robbed or killed—for he did not have much to gain out of life except death. What does one do in cases like this?

A priority for the family

Families also need to contribute to the well being of children. Most street children have a family, and the law states the need for every child to be reintegrated into his family and that all the shelters are temporary. I agree with this, but I do not understand how it can happen when little is done to reverse the disintegration of families.

When I asked the NGOs associated with our network that have shelters for street and abandoned children what their recommendation would be, they were unanimous in saying they would like to see a public social policy put in place for the family. We cannot require some care from a family when the family itself needs to be taken care of. We cannot reintegrate a child when his family is struggling to survive, when there is not enough money to help the family to provide for their basic needs.

There are thousand of single-parent families in which the mother is the head of the household and has to provide the family's income, as in the case of João's family. If a social policy for the family would guarantee day care for small kids, if it would guarantee an education system in which João could have received a quality education, spending not only half a day but a full day in school, with sports activities, cultural activities and other important things for his life development, he would not have needed to go to work on the streets and probably would never have become a street child. His brother who died would have been more likely to receive health care and could be alive today. In reality, though, several daycare centers have been closed

because of delays in receiving the money the government had the obligation to provide. Some institutions have gone more than six months without receiving the designated funds and have been forced to close. Pressure needs to be applied to decrease corruption and to place more investment in quality education.

2. Street children need to be educated.

The quality of education is another very important issue. Violence is a reality all over the country and much more so in the urban centers and slum areas. But the solution is neither repression nor a larger number of police; it is a holistic social-education system that will teach new values, that will change the focus of children's concept of life, that will raise hopes for a better and equal future for poor youth who find in the drug business their means to dress like the others, to buy brand-name clothes, shoes and the material things they think are important. I believe drug addiction can be fought with a good education and new opportunities for income.

In his article, "Why so many executions in São Paulo's periphery?" Bruno Paes Manso, a journalist and researcher at the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics, wrote:

The range of actions needed to contain violence demands a level of political will never before seen in dealing with São Paulo's huge problems. One key area is education. Police statistics indicate that both homicide victims and killers have little or no formal schooling. According to police numbers, only 2% of homicide victims ever reached high school. The remaining 98% is composed of young people who dropped out of school before the 8th grade, many of whom are illiterate. Of the killers, only 10% reached high school. Violence in the urban peripheries suggests that the other 5% makes a big difference. Parents complain that half-day class schedules (in Brazil children attend school in either the morning or the afternoon) provide too little learning and too much idleness. Unsupervised children often get mixed up in criminal activities in the street, encouraged by what parents call the "wrong crowd." Child labor, criticized by the U.S. government, is often viewed with pride in Brazil's urban peripheries. Going to school in the morning and working in the afternoon is one of the surest ways for a teenager to live a long life away from crime. Special programs could be developed by both the public and private sections to lengthen the school day from, say, four to six hours and to subsidize part-time jobs for adolescents. Government projects involving the moral authority of mothers in these communities could be a viable way of encouraging children to live decent lives. Mothers are the care providers that most willingly invest their time in bettering the community. But they cannot do it alone.

3. Street children need help to get off drugs.

A major problem faced by street children and children living in the slums is the use of drugs. Some of the kids' drug use is limited to sniffing glue, which helps them overcome the difficulties of life on the streets. As they grow, however, they start using heavier drugs and get involved with the drug business. There is therefore a high number of deaths related to drug use. From 5% to 77.3% of street children in the city of São Paulo between the ages of nine and 14 use heavy drugs. The Brazilian Center of Psychotropic Drugs Information (CEBRID) said in 2001 that in Fortaleza, 33.2% of street children use not so heavy drugs, but 55.7% use heavy ones. In Rio de Janeiro, 82.4% between the ages of twelve and 18 make use of very heavy drugs. The number of

deaths related to drugs and the drug traffic in Rio de Janeiro is comparable to the number of deaths in a civil war.

In this area there is a need for a social policy to help those kids involved with drugs. The numbers are alarming, and the existing shelters complain of the lack of specific rehabilitation centers for youth involved with drugs. Most of the rehabilitation centers I know of in the city of Rio are for adults. Normally, the kids with drug addiction are sent to the shelters that serve abandoned children who suffer from other kinds of maltreatment, where they do not have the specific staff and resources to offer quality assistance. Very often our office receives calls from parents, friends and relatives looking for a place for a youth who wishes to get free of drugs, or who needs to be removed to another place because he has been threatened by the drug business and is in risk of being murdered. But there are no places for these kids. I know that the cost of providing more facilities is very high, but if we want to reduce violence—if adolescents are a priority—the youth need to be a priority in the government's budget.

4. Street children need protection against sexual violence.

There is an urgent need for a social policy to protect children from sexual abuse. According to Dimenstein (1996), Brazil has the highest rate of child abuse in Latin America and the second highest in the world, second only to Thailand. The same author noted that 80% of the children and adolescents involved in sex exploitation today were victims of incest. The numbers are alarming and something more needs to be done. It is true that the government has given special attention to the issue, but with one of the best laws for child protection, it is unacceptable that our country ranks second in the world for child abuse. It proves that there is an urgent need to put into practice the protection policies that now exist only on paper. Our country has advanced in the confronting of the issue of sexual exploitation, but there is much still to be done.

We need to conduct research on the situation in the whole country that will allow the actors to set up goals and indicators. There is also a need for defense centers specifically to deal with children who have suffered abuse. Raising awareness that the abuse needs to be denounced is a long process and a big challenge, but it needs to be addressed, along with ways to protect both the victim and the denouncer. Another specific area needs more investment, as well as more articulation among the governmental and nongovernmental spheres at both the national and international levels: to seek solutions to the problem of sexual tourism and child trafficking.

5. Street children need to get out of child labor.

A study on child labor in Brazil by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) found that there are 1.5 million working children and adolescents in the 5-13 age bracket, another 1.5 million in the 14-15 group, and 2.4 million adolescents between 16 and 17 irregularly inserted in the labor market.

Brazil was one of the first countries to establish a program to combat child labor, and it has been recognized as a model for Latin America. The Program for the Eradication of Child Labor (PETI) currently benefits 810,000 children in 2,606 Brazilian municipalities. PETI aims to eliminate all forms of child labor. The program pays a grant to families with children between

seven and 15 who are involved in any type of work. The family, on the other hand, needs to guarantee that children will be removed from work and enrolled in school.

I agree that this is a very program, but it has its deficiencies. The main one, in my opinion (and on this some other organizations agree), is that the government needs to develop a parallel program for the family. The results have proved that if the family has no way to provide for its basic needs and no way to raise its income, the child will still be forced to work to provide for the family. The parents need professionalization, education and orientation to run their own businesses or even participate in a group enterprise so they can provide for the basic needs of the family.

I believe that poverty is not the only problem for child labor. The lack of a good educational system and good public social policies that guarantee children's rights creates a gap that allows opportunists looking for a source of cheap labor to take advantage of kids' need to work. A great part of our society still tolerates child labor, for they believe that it is better for a child to work than to steal or do nothing. Many people in our society still associate a youth's not working with leisure, marginality or even delinquency. There needs to be a strong concretization of what the law says about child labor.

Last week I was talking with a nine-year-old girl who has worked since she was seven to help with her family's income. I was telling her she should be in school or at home, and a woman came up to us and told me the little girl was right, for she was helping her mom and her little brothers. She bought some candy the girl was selling and left very proud that she had done the best for the child.

6. Street youth need jobs.

There is a need for more job opportunities for youth. They need to be motivated to study with the perspective that by doing so they will be able to find an honest job that will permit them to provide for their needs. A good opportunity for a youth to find a job is through the application of a new law regarding jobs for young people (Law 10.097/2000). The government has an important part to play by helping raise awareness about and fulfilling this law.

A 2005 report by Marina Rosenfeld and Andressa Munik said that on May 2 of this year, the Abrinq Foundation, a Brazilian association of toy producers, launched a public campaign in São Paulo called "Apprentice Law: your company teaches and everyone learns." This was a combined initiative for the rights of children and adolescents between the Abrinq Foundation and the Ethos Institute, an institute of business and corporate social responsibility. The campaign aimed to catch the attention of society for the insertion of adolescents from age 14 to 18 in the labor market, based on the federal law for apprenticeship of teenagers (Law 10.097/2000).

There is a need for the application of the law and incentives for the companies to hire. But one also needs to be conscious that the government will not be able to solve the problem by itself. There is a need of articulation by NGOs and enterprises to meet this great challenge.

7. Street children need a good role model or mentor.

The ECA prescribes the following measures in cases of youth crime: a warning, mandatory reparation of damages, community service, assisted liberty (parole), semi-liberty or incarceration in an educational institution. A report of the international NGO Human Rights Watch, with its headquarters in the USA, presented the results of research conducted in the Brazilian institutions for delinquent kids. According to the document, there are too many children for the available space, leading to overcrowded conditions, as well as several cases of guards' committing acts of verbal abuse and physical violence against the inmates. It also mentions the abuse of authority by the educators or agents. It proves the inefficiency of the system. The kids come out worse than when they arrived. Like João, these kids need role models who are different from the police who are able to kill with impunity. It is interesting to ask a street child what they would like to be; a high number of them say they would like to be police officers. Those kids need good references in life other than the gang leader who has power, money and women, but a short life. They need somehow to have their self-esteem raised, but we need to find other ways to help them with this.

These kids are good kids, normal kids who from a young age have had a tough life and need to be affirmed and accepted. Program need to be developed that will reinforce the self-esteem of these youth in different ways. As in the case of João, it is very important that these programs have a holistic point of view, where not only the child's physical and emotional problems, but also the spiritual ones, are addressed. Where the child will learn that he or she has an important place in life, as a special person made by God.

I would like to mention an excellent project developed by a group of students from a university in Rio de Janeiro to help kids in trouble with the law. The project is called "Assisted Liberty Guide or Mentor." The students realized that what the kids need is a good reference: someone who can talk to them, who can be a mentor and teach them new values and perspective for life. This project for delinquent youth has been implemented by the Second Office of Juveniles and Infants of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro. They are looking for people in society who will donate part of their time to help those kids by being mentors. The child's sentence would be to be counseled by a mentor for a certain period each week. They have asked the Network to help them by presenting the challenge to church leaders, for they also believe in the holistic way of helping those kids.

8. Street children need well-prepared workers and educators.

A great challenge for those who work with street children is to find well-prepared educators who both love the children and have the knowledge to deal with the main issues street children face. Because of the cost, most of the shelters and children's homes hire educators with less education who are able to work for lower salaries. This solves the problem of their sustainability, but raises the problem of lower quality and less meaningful work with the children. It is more than proved that an investment in staff training is an important element for the development of the work and the child attended by the workers.

There is also a need for more investment in hiring interdisciplinary staff, which is required by the law and made necessary by the problems the organizations face day after day. The shelters, both governmental and private, need more investment for this expensive but needed resource.

The network has sought solutions that can minimize the cost of training and provide needed staff through partnership with other organizations who believe in the need for qualified staff for the success of the services offered.

9. Street children need for a new strategy to be reached.

My experience of running three homes for street children—seeing lives transformed, seeing others lost, being a strong reference to some of the kids to this day, particularly in the case of João, seeing the long way our nation and society still have to go to help and protect children and adolescents instead of severely punishing them—drove me to a new task of pursuing laws to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents in our country. I was challenged by the vision of a network as a way to be a voice and a forum for children, a way of integration of efforts, resources and experiences, and a way to achieve better results as a group than as an isolated individual. After a long time of research and information collection, I challenged a group of organizations to join forces and work together. In 2002 the Network was named Rede Viva-RJ and today more than 35 organizations are associated. They develop projects together, exchange experiences, learn together, support each other in hard situations, for they understand each other's efforts better than any other group, and work toward becoming a strong voice in the defense of the rights of our children and adolescents.

Making use of a network is a new strategy and a great way to achieve better and higher results. After a long time and intense research, some of the weaknesses and strengths of each organization were registered, making possible the creation of network projects in which the group together develops the criteria and pushes to accomplish them, with the facilitation of the coordination and administrative office. The network today has the project to empower the institution, offering qualification to the leaders, the educators and the administrative team, and seeking to promote better and higher quality services offered to the children.

Another project the group developed in partnership with the Bank of Brazil and the Zero Hunger Program of the federal government was the implementation of 21 computer centers. Our organizations offered the space and personnel and the Bank donated used computers. The results have benefited thousands of children from the slums, who did not have access to the Internet and the computer world. An extension project has been put together, in which about twelve of these institutions are seeking to provide professional training in different areas of computer use, to help thousands of youths who have not had much opportunity in life to be qualified and competitive in the market. It will help many of them to get off drugs, to have some source of income and to help with their family income.

“With the collaboration of Rede Viva-RJ, many things become possible. We have a house for girls, and with the courses provided we can help our girls much better. We also have a day care center here in the community, and we have been able to develop a better quality work through the experiences the network has offered. Through this unity we have been able to help many young people have a better option for life than the life in the drug business.” (Alexandre – Coordinator of the computer center of Youth With a Mission in the community of Borel, Rio de Janeiro)

“I live in a street without a name, in a home without a number, but through the computer center I can talk with the whole world.” (Paulo, 11, from INPAR (Presbyterian Institute Álvaro Reis))

Another important project that is in the research stage is the girls' project. It is a participative project in which a group of girls has been able to participate in constructing of the strategy that aims to help the girls meet their main needs and rights. They will be educated in different aspects

of life; we hope to be able to reduce early pregnancies and sexual diseases, to train girls for professional life and to get them into the labor market. The main difference of this project is that it has been done in a network where different NGOs leaders can discuss together and construct together with the girls as the protagonist, for they know exactly how they would like us to help.

The network also provides a space for a forum on the children's rights issue and seeks to communicate with government authorities and enterprises, believing that the problem of street children—and any other problem of children at risk—has to be faced by society in general. Each one needs to find his part in this great task, joining hands and reaching out to our children.

The network is also a space for sharing problems, a place where people can find others who face the same kind of problem, a place where one helps the other. For example, we have a situation now in which one of the projects would have to stop its activities for lack of money to pay the rent. The members of the network went to visit the project leader and gave encouragement and money to keep it going, because they shared the idea that the children to be reached and helped are not only those from our own institutions, but that each one has a special passion and wants to protect all the children at risk they can.

“Joeli Barbosa da Silva, born September 11, 1992, came to Adonai Home February 14, 2002, and has been with us up to the present. Like many other girls, Joeli ran away from home because of family maltreatments. She is in the third grade and has been having a good school achievement. She is a very sensitive child who relates very well with those around her. For us in the Adonai Home, the Rede Viva-RJ has been a strategy from God that has helped us in the education and qualification to better care for our children at risk.” (João Figueiredo da Silva – President of Adonai Home, a facility situated in the city of São Gincalo in Rio de Janeiro.) When the Adonai Home came to the Network, it was about to close, but with the mobilization of the others in the group, little by little they have moved to a point at which they are able to meet all the necessary demands to maintain the house for the kids.

I would like to finish my speech with something João said to me three days ago. When I told him I was going to share his life testimony at this event, he told me how important I was to him. I said I felt that what I have done for him was so little and was about nothing, and he told me, “Your nothing is much for those who have nothing.” Let us bring together our nothing and do much for those who think they have nothing. Let us help them to raise the great person, the human being they are.

10. Street children need you and me, for together we can make a difference.

Thank you for this opportunity.